Forest Industry Heritage Places Study

Sawmills and Tramways

South Eastern Queensland

by John Kerr

January 1998

Contents

Acknowledgments

Study Methodology

Considerably more has been written about Forestry, and the campaigns to preserve forests in National Parks, than about sawmilling. In preparing the overview I consulted sources which gave a picture of the development of forestry in Queensland, including the annual reports of the Lands and later Forestry Departments. Given the paucity of writing on sawmilling in Queensland, the overview made considerable use of general texts of the development of the sawmill and logging practices in Australia generally, demonstrating the relevance to the Queensland situation as much as possible.

Pettigrew's sawmill in William Street, Brisbane, which opened in 1853, was arguably Queensland's first major industrial enterprise, predating the separation of Queensland as a colony by six years. While the establishment of a sawmill remained a major investment, the progress of sawmilling was better documented.

Within two decades sawmills were coming to be commonplace, although still an important investment in a regional economy. By the 1880s they were generally unremarkable. Steam engines and sawing machinery attracted much less attention. When the internal combustion engine became common and reliable, the significance of the investment fell even further.

Although the government controlled the harvesting of timber on crown land through licensing and later royalties, until 1936 the establishment of a sawmill required no approval by the colonial or state government and, especially outside the towns, attracted little attention by local government.

Consequently the records of sawmills are patchy and, for their number, surviving records are sparse.

One axeman, four woodcarvers and seven foresters appear in the first 12 volumes of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* but no sawmillers; the word does not occur in the list of occupations. Nine sawmillers appear in *A Biographical Register 1788-1939* (those considered but not accepted for ADB). There were Queenslanders, Lars Andersen, Cornelius Galloway and George Edward Martin. Galloway was a "Journalist, Goldminer and Sawmiller"; the entry describes him as "farmer, sawmiller, Gympie 1882". Martin operated sawmills at Stratford near Cairns, and then Tolga on the Atherton Tableland, its original

name of Martintown recording his pioneering role. Andersen of the Brisbane Valley is treated in some detail in this report.

The greatest source of information about sawmills comes from published regional histories. Sawmilling was too widespread and small scale for individual enterprises to receive much attention in comprehensive histories of Queensland. W.F. Morrison's *Aldine History of Queensland*, published in 1888, was the most valuable source of information on sawmills last century, particularly the unpaged appendix to Volume 2 which uncritically records the achievements of many of the notable industrialists in 19th century Queensland.

Kevin Ahearn's *From Crosscut to Chain Saw*, while covering only one part of the study area, is the most valuable record of sawmilling this century. It is particularly valuable for its detailed recording of oral history, combined with study of a number of written sources. References are provided to sources, and although the style of presentation at times makes disentangling of the information difficult, its self-funded publication was a landmark. Works on sawmilling in the Bunya Mountains and in the Ravensbourne area exhibit a similar kind of dedication.

In order to gain as comprehensive an inventory of sawmills as possible, the trades listings of *Pugh's Almanac* were consulted for the 19th century and from 1892 to 1949, the Trades listing for sawmillers in the *Queensland Post Office Directory*. As explained in the preliminary notes to the inventory, both these annual publications contains many errors of omission and commission. Nevertheless they provide reference to many sawmills not otherwise recorded.

Time and financial constraints made it impossible to cover all sources. Thus a combing of Brisbane and regional newspapers and of business names records at Queensland State Archives could be expected to yield substantial amounts of additional information. Newspaper reference to sawmills became less common once sawmills ceased to have much news value.

A relatively small number of sawmill businesses were incorporated last century and early this century. The company records provide details of shareholdings, and sometimes of business agreements, missing from other sources.

A substantial amount of information was collated by mining research notes collected in previous research projects. As the railways played a major part in the transport of logs and sawn timber for a century, many larger mills had private railway sidings and railway records helped provide information on the approximate years of operation of sawmills and their changes in ownership. Statistics on the amount of log and sawn timber (pooled) in the Annual Report of the Commissioner for Railways gives valuable information that was only partly exploited in this study.

The published regional histories often contained information on local sawmills that could not be obtained elsewhere, and such information has been extensively used. (In the regional overview, these secondary sources are extensively referenced; where there is no reference, the information is based on Pugh and the Post Office Directory.)

Few of the regional histories with worthwhile information on sawmills provide references. One of the best, *Where Two Rivers Run*, lists sources for the chapter on the timber industry but without any endnotes. Many other histories, like this one, make extensive use of oral history, but do not even give this much reference to sources. Few sawmills have been written up in journals, those that were mainly being those with timber tramways, and appear in *Queensland Heritage* and *Light Railways*.

Some regional histories appear to closely confirm information in Pugh and the Post Office Directory, arousing the suspicion that the history may simply have been based on the information in these sources regurgitated without reference. Despite some reservations, much of the material is valuable, and recorded nowhere else, and this report was based on a quite thorough use of such sources as held in the John Oxley Library as well as private collections. School histories and small pamphlets were generally included only where their coverage indicated that this was likely to be productive.

The written word was supplemented by oral interview, and examination of the records held by various historical societies. These varied from very little to substantial holdings. There is scope to extend the oral interviews.

Selecting the Sites to be Studied

Industrial sites present many special problems for heritage assessment. In general, the successful industrial complexes have continually been adapted and modernised. Technology generally dictates that this is generally a process of eliminating old equipment and often all evidence of its existence before new machinery is installed. Sawmills share this problem.

Sawmilling machinery was relatively compact, even though laid out in a large shed. Consequently, especially until the recent time of contracting sawmill numbers, the machinery from closed sawmills was usually dismantled and reused. As a result there are few sawmills that are closed and still retain either the original machinery or the machinery in use at time of closure.

The sheds in which sawmills were contained can and have been adapted to other uses. Only a comparatively small number have, however, survived. In the bush, they are liable to destruction from fire once abandoned, or to reuse or looting of the materials, chiefly timber and galvanised iron. In the cities and towns, land values are usually much greater than the value of the sawmill buildings, leading to demolition. The type of structure is such that relocation is generally neither economic nor practical.

The typical sawmill site thus is generally very impoverished, with a ground search commonly revealing very little evidence. Never abandoned mills may provide evidence of concrete foundations and sometimes rails embedded in concrete used as a means of stabilising the tramways used for log carriages and for moving sawn timber. Some older mills show evidence of boiler settings but many mills relied on portable steam boilers for power, and few remain intact.

In the west of the state, an area largely excluded from the study, the typical sawmill was a portable mill, an economical solution to the problem of a low density timber resource. Until long-distance road haulage became relatively cheap, moving the sawmill was more profitable than increasing the distance for hauling logs. Nearer the coast, sawmills were less frequently designed to be portable but nevertheless moves were not uncommon. The amount of evidence left behind was often minimal without the benefit of archaeological investigation.

Given the nature of the written source material, local community contacts were generally valuable in finding sites to survey. In other cases, sites of known sawmills were located from map references, and from previous experience.

Timber tramways, being largely constructed of wood, are virtually non-existent in their original form. Practically all that remains are the earthworks. As these, however, were in a number of cases substantial, it was possible to locate a number of these tramways even though few are marked on maps. Given that the timber tramway represents a higher degree of investment than for most family business sawmills, and generally showed adaptation of technology to financial and physical circumstances, and they were fairly few in number, a much greater proportion of tramways were included in the study sites.

Overall, the sites were chosen to reflect the range of sites potentially meeting one or more of the heritage criteria, despite their generally degraded state. The comparatively small number of identifiable sites means that the sites visited were a fairly large proportion of the sites known and considered suitable for inclusion.

Sites not Selected

In assessing the sites selected it is important to consider the important sites not selected. These include Gillam's Sawmill at Grandchester. This is a steam powered sawmill, already heritage listed. It is a small family operated mill, not so much typical of its era but rather the result of a commitment to keeping old technology operating.

At what was potentially the most important site - Pettigrew's Sawmill, Brisbane - nothing could be found of this early sawmill.

The sawmill at Elanda Point, Lake Cootharaba and its tramway has been studied in depth with its own conservation plan (Hibbard & Crosby) and was not selected for this study.

Several tramways have been the subject of publications which provide maps, historical photographs and some evidence of remains at the time of publication. These include:
    Lars Anderson Cressbrook Creek Tramway
    Lars Anderson Bunya Mountains Tramway
    Munro's Hampton-Perserverance Tramway
    Pettigrew's Cooloola Tramway

Mungar Tramway

The Department of Environment created reports on the Jimna area and Mount Mee which provide details on remains of short incline or winch tramways, one in each area.

The three tramways on Fraser Island and McKenzie's Sawmill site have been separately investigated by Department of Environment officers during the Regional Forest Agreement studies of the south east Queensland Biogeographic region. Much of the formation of the most northerly tramline running inland from Urang Creek has been converted into road but retains much of the character of the tramline formation.

The Gympie Woodworks Museum contains equipment from a variety of sources, including a steam sawmill in operating condition which is demonstrated in action every three months.

At Moore in the Brisbane Valley, the Aribaby Creek Tramway was about 4 kilometres long and had evidence of ruined bridges when seen c. 1970.

The Head Sawmill was examined but the remains - chiefly a boiler and a hall or shed, not the main sawmill shed, give very little indication of sawmilling despite the long history of the site.

The Mount Mistake Sawmill & Chute has not been visited, awaiting access. The photograph in *From Crosscut to Chain Saw* showing a band saw gives an indication that if measures to protect this isolated site from vandalism are effective, this is one of the more complete sites and warrants heritage listing under Queensland *Heritage Act* Criterion (b) and (d) (Appendix 1) for its rarity and well-preserved (compared to most sites) of a mid 20th century sawmill.

The Brooweena settlement and sawmill being an operating sawmill was not practical to record but would seem to deserve a study of its own. Taromeo sawmill and township is reported on briefly but also comes into this category.

There were reported to be some remains of the Eurimbula Sawmill near Agnes Water, but requiring an amphibious vehicle for access. This was possibly the earliest sawmill in the area but was only in operation a short time and is of more local significance. No positive identification could be found of the Toolooa sawmill near Gladstone although the old railway formation (abandoned c 1988) is evident.

Chutes were not included in the terms of reference.

Community Contacts

The author was assisted by individual, historical societies, libraries and archives. Further contacts are available and are being contact in an ongoing study. Those who assisted included:

Individuals

Mr Kevin Ahearn, Blacksoil
Mrs Audienne Blythe, Yandina
Mr Bill Brandon, West Chermside
Mrs Elaine Brown, Wolvi
Mr John Bunn, Childers
Ms Angela Collyer, Boonah
Mr Ernie Hills, Toowoomba
Mrs Joy Jones nee Watt, St Lucia
Dr Lorna McDonald, Rockhampton
Ms Patricia O'Shea, Toowong
Mrs Pechey, Listening Ridge, Pechey
Mr John Schiavo, New Farm
Mr John Sinclair, Sydney
Mr Summers, Builyan
Mrs Bronwyn Willmott nee Day, Brisbane

Historical Societies

Bundaberg & District Historical Society & Museum
Cooroora Historical Society
Enoggera & District Historical Society
Maryborough, Wide Bay & Burnett Historical Society
Isis and District Historical Society
Port Curtis Historical Society
Royal Historical Society of Queensland
Toowoomba Historical Society
Windsor & District Historical Society